



RANTS & RAVES

Experience has taught Mel Croucher to be wary of geeks bearing gifts. Simon Brew, however, is far too young to have learnt that lesson yet, and will do anything for a free pizza

RECORDING ANGEL



MEL CROUCHER RAVES

Dearly beloved, the next reading is taken from the Book Of The Bleeding Obvious, Chapter One, Verse One, wherein it is written, "Beware of geeks bearing gifts".

The specific geek bearing gifts works at PC World, and in a moment of weakness, while I wend my way through his store in search of some wireless routing toys, I accept his offer of a free all-in-one Lexmark X2480 printer-scanner-copier-bumwiper, on condition that I spend over a hundred quid right here, right now. No strings attached, or to be more precise no

USB cable attached, but hey nonny no, how can I possibly lose? A free printer is a free printer, and I can always give it to a relative, or a young offender, or an economic migrant, which in my case are usually one and the same person.

But of course, I soon learn that nothing is free, and I have to part with £17.99 for an ink cartridge to test that this free Lexmark actually works. It works. Unfortunately, my greed and gullibility have blinkered me to the fact that in order for the machine to print a document in black and white, it mixes three little reservoirs of cyan, magenta and yellow ink together in a muddy approximation of monochrome. There is no black ink cartridge.

After I print out a few chapters of my latest unpublishable novel, an angry little window pops up on my monitor and in no uncertain terms orders me to buy another ink cartridge. I discover that I can't refill the cartridge myself or buy a cheap clone, and that the exclusive stockist of compatibles for this machine is none other than – that's right, folks – PC World. I have been taken in by the oldest trick in the book.

FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

The original version of this scam was perpetrated by Thomas Edison over a hundred years ago. After going bankrupt, his company contrived to give away talking-machines to consumers who were

hungry for entertainment technology, and then charge them 35 cents for every four minutes of recordings stored on fragile wax cylinders. They made a fortune.

I inherited several hundred of these phonograph recordings, and spent decades trying to protect the cylinders against mildew, frost, heat and fumble-fingered humans. I can tell you that boxes of Edison cylinders take up an enormous amount of storage space, but not as much as my collection of 78s from the 1920s to the late 1950s. These 10in hard discs are made of shellac and can store around three minutes of audio recording per side, and several hundred of the brittle buggers need a reinforced floor to hold them and a fork-lift truck to shift them.

Then there are my 12in vinyl discs, in their evocative 20th-century covers, racked on groaning, sagging shelves. They spin sedately at 33 revolutions per minute and store up to 30 minutes of sound per side. As for my crates of open-reel tape and cassettes, and the thousands of hours of audio data stored on CDs amassed since 1984, a pox on them all. I have decided



to declutter another part of my life and rid myself of the time, space, energy, guilt and stress involved in looking after my old recordings, and yet keep them all. Hooray for the digital revolution!

MUSICAL SHARES

I batch up my collections and shove them on eBay. I find that some are worth good money to an avid collector, whereas others are common as muck. Those I can't sell, I pass on to my chum Iggy The Blob, for disposal at the car boot. Before I bundle up a batch, I transfer the recordings to digital format using a variable bit-rate (where quiet stuff takes up less memory than loud stuff) then bang them on to an MP3 player. My 80GB iPod is feather-light and can hold my entire collection.

I find to my delight that all the dimly remembered music I never quite got round to playing again is now available to me any time, any place, and I discover it is not the physical cylinders, discs and tapes that I treasure, but the music itself.

I put the Lexmark X2480 printer-scanner-copier-bumwiper machine on eBay too, but it

doesn't sell. Iggy The Blob also fails to get shot of it at the car boot. Yeah, I know. The punters are wary of geeks bearing gifts.

SPAM ME!



SIMON BREW RANTS

I signed up for the McDonald's email newsletter because at the time it was offering free cinema tickets to a Disney film. And because I'm a bit tight, that sounded like a good deal.

I signed up for a Microsoft Office newsletter after an internet rumour of free Amazon vouchers (which proved not to be true in my case). HMV? That'll be the exclusive offers to subscribers, which don't seem all that exclusive to me once I've found out what they are. How many more times can they try to sell me a *Friends* boxset that I don't want?

CD Wow? That was the potential for free vouchers. Borders? There was a sniff of 20 per cent off. Pizza Hut? I simply can't remember, but free food is very much a candidate.

ALL OFFERS CONSIDERED

Which brings me to this moment. As I sit here perusing my inbox, I can't help but paint the shameful picture of a man who, while he wouldn't sell a relative or anything that clichéd, would certainly accept a tirade of spam in exchange for the mere sniff of getting something worth a fiver or so for free.

Only it's not spam, is it? How can it be spam when I've all but invited it into my home, made it a cuppa and stuck the fire on for it? The spam filters don't catch it because there's nothing to catch, and I've let some of these newsletters seep into my inbox for years in the hope of getting a pound off a pizza, or a 10-minute jump start on an online sale – along with thousands of others who signed up for the same reason.

But that was then, this is now.

For reasons I can't fathom but must put down to laziness (which is a far better reason than holding out hope for another freebie) I've never bothered to unsubscribe to many of these before. I know it's crazy; all it takes is a click at the bottom of an email. But in the same way that, ahem, I used to ring up for catalogues when I was 14 simply because I wanted some post, I was still at the stage where the morning contents of my inbox made me curious. I like the idea of receiving 24 new messages but, routinely, 22 of them prove to be rubbish – and it serves me right.

For while the spam filter will, on the whole, eat the junk, the rubbish that I've asked for is smiling away on my screen. Smugly.

They had to go.

Hilariously, when you try to unsubscribe, many of the senders direct you to a splash screen where they try to convince you to keep receiving the messages, telling you what unparalleled human joy lies within them. Never mind the fact that I've fallen for their teasing, tantalising temptations before and woken up the morning after feeling disappointed, with not even a pizza, coffee or free cinema ticket on my bedside table.

Yet I'm still tempted to give them the benefit of the doubt, because who doesn't love a good freebie or a good offer? Isn't that why, in these days of internet shopping, many of us have a cupboard full of stuff we look at every few months and utter one word: why?

Technology experts have been known to remark that the biggest problem with computers is the users themselves. That may be true, but I didn't see any of those experts at a free McDonald's screening of *Treasure Planet* in 2002. And if that's not worth suffering the 324,895 emails I've received since, I don't know what is.

HELL HATH NO FURY



MEL CROUCHER RANTS

I am sure that sellers of security software start out with good intentions, but according to the 11th-century Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, "Hell is full of good intentions". In which case I damn McAfee to go burn in hell.

Let me tell you why. It takes one click to get involved with the McAfee buying process, thanks to the simple 'buy now' button on the home page of the company's website. As soon as you sign up for its protection racket, you get a friendly confirmation email and a printable receipt that offers "a full refund if your request is within the first 30 days of purchase". Fair enough. But what it should also say is: "By the way, schmuck, we're going to filch 50 quid a year from you for the rest of your miserable life, because we've got your credit card details so you can't stop us."

ALL IN THE SMALL PRINT

McAfee began automatically renewing customer accounts as far back as 2001, and over the past year, rival bloodsuckers such as Symantec and Microsoft's new

Windows Live OneCare package have joined in. There is small print tucked away on obscure webpages, but the security vendors are relying on the fact that buyers are too browbeaten or ignorant to question the sign-up process. And don't forget that a huge number of sign-ups are derived from the ubiquitous practice of pre-installing security software. In other words, the buyer has no choice over which security package they use.

I don't consider myself either browbeaten or ignorant, which is why I am particularly angry about McAfee. When I signed up, I was fully aware of its automatic renewal practice, and there's a little note on my wall-calendar reminding me to cancel my annual subscription before it runs out next month. But McAfee has not waited 12 months before sneaking into my bank account and stealing its blackmail renewal money. The bastards have fleeced me with 30 days still to run.

I check with my bank to confirm that there are no direct debits or standing orders in McAfee's favour. There's none. I demand that my bank refunds the unauthorised debit. It is powerless to do so. I consult Sharkey, my contract lawyer, who growls that McAfee sells a 'subscription', which must be cancelled in writing before it can cease.

CLICK AND MISS

So I go back to the McAfee website, with its one-click 'buy now' button, to cancel my subscription. There is no one-click button to cancel. There is nothing in any of the menus to suggest that cancellation is an option. In fact, there is nothing on the entire site that allows me even to think about cancelling.

I hit the bulletin boards, where armies of other victims are suffering the same experience. A completely different website is cited, called mcafeehelp.com, where Document ID:5213 will explain everything to me. Hey! This is where McAfee displays the small print about automatic renewals. Ho! Here's a link for cancellation. Ha! It directs me to a customer service page where I am asked to give my language and location. Hrumpf! When I do this I am told I can email someone about something some time, but the estimated wait to join the queue is probably two days.

And that, dear reader, is why I am about to chalk a pentagram and light the black candles. Hell will soon receive some new guests – about 30 days early by my reckoning. **CS**